

## Overview on the habitat of Early Iron Age communities between the Southern Carpathians, the Olt river and the Danube

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**Keywords:** *habitat, fortified settlements, open settlements, dwellings, fireplaces, Ha A-B period, Oltenia.*

**Abstract:** *In my approach, I chose a separate approach to the subject (fortified settlements vs. open settlements) with an emphasis on those sites that can provide additional and detailed information (elements on the defensive system, housing structures, pits, fireplaces and other complexes). Therefore, we have not taken into account for this purpose those settlements identified only by the collection of ceramic fragments from the surface of the soil but especially those in which housing structures were discovered.*

Unlike areas like the intra-Carpathian space where the archaeological research of the habitat of the Early Iron Age was more sustained, in Oltenia, the data about the settlements of Ha A-B period are less numerous compared to those in the necropolises. An attempt to catalogue and to analyze these settlements was made, even in close connection with the end of the Bronze Age, either for the fortified settlements<sup>2</sup> or for both categories (open and fortified settlements)<sup>3</sup>.

As we know, repertorying settlements also means the inclusion of data obtained from periegetic researches and provides more information on how they are placed or about the pottery or metal artefacts found at surface.

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**The geographical environment, the climate and their importance for habitat.** These two factors (the geographical environment through the resources it offers to the community and the climate through the impact it can have on agriculture) we can say that they have an important and even decisive role in

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<sup>2</sup> Bălan 2012. Thanks to colleague Liviu Gabriel Bălan for making available the manuscript of his doctoral thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Lazăr 2009.

changes in the habitat of communities from the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the first Iron Age in present-day Oltenia and not only here.

Areas with altitude difference (it matters the altitude difference between the fortification and the rest of the area and not necessarily the altitude itself), the basins and the access ways, the watercourses are geographic elements taken into account for the construction of the fortified settlements.

In the Bz D-Ha A period it seems that we are dealing with the disappearance of large-scale settlements and with multiple levels of habitation, replaced by small open-settlements with a thin layer of habitation (an average of 30 cm), so a short period of use. The economic life of those communities is also affected because we are witnessing a subsistence based on pastoralism since agriculture is not viable due to climate cooling during this period<sup>4</sup>. As a result, the settlements are smaller, more scattered and with a shorter habitation, with some exceptions.

### **Types of settlements. Classification**

For the period concerned, the classification of the settlements was made in terms of the absence or presence of the fortification system. This approach is more appropriate when we want to talk about center and periphery, about tribal centers, about social differentiation or the insecurity of this era with an emphasis on the fortified settlement.

#### **1. By landscape**

This criterion gives us an incomplete view due to the fact that an area which benefited from insufficient archaeological researches (and no systematic ones) was the north of Oltenia. That is why, in the current state of research, we will not be able to repertory any settlements in the mountain area.

**1.1. Settlements in the hills area:** Obislavu, Căzănești-Săveasca, Bârsești (Vâlcea), Brădești, Gropșani (Dolj). As a general rule, they are located on the medium and high terraces of the watercourses.

**1.2. Settlements in the plain area:** Portărești, Ghidici, Bistreț (Dolj), Balta Verde (Mehedinți). Except for Portărești, which is a fortified settlement, the rest of the settlements in the plain area are located near the Danube or the lakes, on sandy beams.

**1.3. Settlements on islands:** Insula Banului (Mehedinți).

There are also archaeological materials in caves, which would indicate seasonal living. The settlements in Dubova or Ponicoa caves (Mehedinți) belong to the Insula Banului group.

#### **2. By the presence of the fortification system**

They are divided into 2 categories: fortified settlements and unfortified or open settlements.

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<sup>4</sup> Tomescu 2000.

**2.1. The fortified settlements** mentioned in the archaeological literature are the ones from **Obislavu**<sup>5</sup>-*Dealul Muierii*, Grădiștea commune, Vâlcea county; **Portărești**<sup>6</sup> -*La Cetățui*, Giurgiu commune, Dolj county; **Brădești**<sup>7</sup>-*Valea Rea*, Brădești commune, Dolj county; **Măru**<sup>8</sup>-*La Cetate*, Logrești commune, Gorj county. With the exception of the one from Brădești, highlighted only by surface research and attributed to Insula Banului group (Ostrov Gruppe for B. Hänsel) from Ha B, the other three have benefited from systematic research or surveys and we can place them in Ha A.

Such settlements have attracted much interest and we can make observations about their topography, surface, the type of defensive system and its elements, shape, the cultural and chronological assignment, functionality, housing structures within them. Of course, in the case of the Obislavu fortress it was possible to identify in the field also the open settlement with which it was in close relation.

From a *topographic* point of view, one is located in the hilly area, on a high plateau (Obislavu) and the other two are located in the plain area, with the highest point being the Obislavu fortress at 400 m altitude and the lowest one being the one from Portărești at 60 m altitude.

Their *surface* is based on the geographic space available, regardless of the relief form. Here we can also talk about the thickness of the dwelling layer that not only determines the duration of the use of the settlement but also the social function it could have. Those with a thick layer of habitation can be considered as tribal centers. In the case of fortresses in the area concerned, the surface varies between 1 and 2 ha but for Portărești it will increase due to the successive extension of the fortification system to even 50 ha (?). This new number will be discussed in the section dedicated to the fortification system and it is not based on field research but only GIS (Google Earth).

The *shape* is either circular (Portărești) or oval (Obislavu). At Brădești the shape is dictated by the type of fortification, namely the fortified (barred) promontory.

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<sup>5</sup> Marinescu, Damian 1984-1985.

<sup>6</sup> Tăulea 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Nica 1990. The fortified settlement was severely affected by modern works on the railroad crossing the locality.

<sup>8</sup> Calotiu *et alii* 1987, p. 41-43; Lazăr 2005, p. 99-100 mentions in the repertory both fortifications, Măru and Obislavu. In fact, the fortified settlements of Obislavu and Măru are one and the same. The author of the excavations, Fl. Marinescu (Marinescu, Damian 1984-1985, p. 126, 128) mentions this fact which may lead to confusion: „Due to fluctuations in boundaries between settlements, the fortress was mentioned when at Logrești commune, Gorj county, when at Grădiștea commune, Vâlcea county [...] field research has shown that in fact, although recorded as such in literature, there are not two fortresses but one. Today, the vestiges of the fortress are located on the border of Grădiștea commune, Vâlcea county, at about 4 km N-V from its center and about 2 km S-V from Obislavu village”. Therefore, the correct and current name of the archaeological site is Obislavu-*Dealul Muierii*, Grădiștea commune, Vâlcea county, with the removal from the archaeological repertoires of Măru settlement.

*Type of fortification.* Obislavu and Portărești have a fortification by enclosure with a defensive system, which is also required by their shape, and in Brădești we have a fortified (barred) promontory.

The *defensive system* is present in three variants: with earthen rampart and defense ditch (Portărești), earthen rampart only (Obislavu), defense ditch only (Brădești). At Brădești, systematic research or surveys could identify other elements of the defensive system, because in its case we have only a surface survey.

Unlike Obislavu and Brădești, where we have only one line of defense, at Portărești, although only the first line was investigated, it is possible to have three concentric lines of defense (Fig. 3), the third one being the largest. However, this situation observed by colleague Bălan<sup>9</sup> in satellite images will have to be confirmed in the field as well.

*Elements of the defensive system.* A complete defensive system should have consisted of surrounding the settlement with a defense ditch in front of the earthen rampart and a palisade above the second one. On the ground, the situation today is different from the reality then. The earthen ramparts are much eroded and flattened, the ditches are partially filled and the palisade is missing (either burned at the conquest of the settlement or affected by the perishable nature of the wood). We can clearly speak of the presence of the palisade when we observe the ashes resulting from the burning and the holes from the beams that formed the stockade. In the case of the fortified settlements above we will only analyze those defensive elements that were identified during the archaeological research.

#### The defense earthen rampart. At:

Obislavu – has a width of 5 m and a preserved height of 0,80-1 m and an initial height of 2,5-3 m, probably<sup>10</sup>. It was built of earth, wood and stone. It had two earth-bound stone blocks, 0,30-0,40 m wide, between which was the mass of the 4 m wide bank and which was crossed by vertical beams, horizontally and longitudinally. On the west side it also contains the so-called "rolls" or large clay bricks.

Portărești – has a width of 7,5-8 m and a preserved height of 0,20-0,30 m. It was built of earth, wood and stone. It had 2 or even 3 stone blocks rows<sup>11</sup> between which the mass of the bank composed of weathered earth.

#### The defense ditch. At:

Brădești – is the only defensive element identified.

Portărești – has a width of 17 m, a depth of 1,93 m and the V-shaped inclined walls.

The palisade. We assume its existence at Obislavu due to traces of ash and coal but no pits were found.

<sup>9</sup> Bălan 2012, p. 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> Marinescu, Damian 1984-1985, p. 129.

<sup>11</sup> Zanoci 2015, p. 73-74.

The entrance to the settlement. It was found only at Obislavu: it consists of 2 gates from which were found the pits from the pillars with diameters of 0,35 m and 0,50 m. The gate with a 0,50 m diameter pillar pit was the outer one and it was even stronger. The distance between the gates was 2 m.

Other elements:

Portărești – berm between the earthen rampart and the ditch, 5 m wide, followed by the earthen rampart with the above dimensions.

Obislavu – round road on the west side behind the interior parament. It was 1 m wide and made of small broken pieces of burnt clay.

*Dating and chronological assignment.* It was based on discovered ceramic fragments and metal parts.

Obislavu – 2 levels of habitation (Verbicioara culture and Vârtop group), chronological assignment in Bz D-Ha A.

Portărești – there is mentioned ceramic that resembles that of Vârtop but also elements Verbicioara V (Govora). A bronze needle, Rollennadel type, can place the settlement here in Ha A.

Brădești – belongs to Insula Banului group from Ha B being one of the few settlements of this group in Oltenia.

*Functionality.* All are considered to be fortified refugee settlements and not tribal centers. In support of these statements come the few identified housing structures, the short duration of habitation but also the fact that at Obislavu, 100-150 m away, was the open settlement.

## **2.2. Unfortified or open settlements**

Although their number is higher <sup>12</sup>, the more relevant are the settlements from Ghidici-Balta Țarova belonging to Vârtop group and the one from Insula Banului belonging to the group with the same name, due to the fact that both have benefited of systematic archaeological research. But in all the settlements from the early period of the First Iron Age one level of habitation was observed, with thin culture layer, which denotes a short-term use and the settlements are more like scattered housing groups.

An exception seems to make the settlement from Ghidici where we have 2 levels of habitation in Ha A, Bistreț-Ișalnița (if we admit here its continuation in Ha A) and Vârtop groups.

## **Housing structures**

The types of dwelling structures were determined by the economy of the Ha A-B communities, by the short period of habitation in settlements and, of course, by climate. It seems logical that a colder climate will lead to the construction of a significant number of huts or half-buried houses, especially in the Insula Banului group. There are also surface dwellings observed through adobe or clusters in the culture layer.

<sup>12</sup> Lazăr 2005, p.71 și urm. ; Lazăr 2009; Lazăr 2011, p. 203-263.

Therefore, in the early period of the First Iron Age in Oltenia, we present the following types of dwelling structures:

### 1. Huts in the ground

**1.1. of rectangular shape** – at Insula Banului (Mehedinți). They have round-corners.

**1.2. of circular shape** – at Insula Banului (Mehedinți);

**1.3. of initially rectangular but then circular form** – were reported in sector A on Insula Banului, the rectangular shape being considered earlier and used for a longer duration<sup>13</sup>. Most had pillar pits in the center (Fig. 6-7).

**1.4. of oval shape** – at Insula Banului (Mehedinți).

**2. Half-buried houses** – are the most numerous dwelling structures in the settlement on Insula Banului, are slightly deepened in the ground and have the bottom and the edges glued with clay. At Brădești-*Valea Rea* (Dolj), in the culture layer strongly affected by modern works were observed half-buried dwelling structures<sup>14</sup>.

### 3. Surface dwellings

**3.1. dwelling with floor** – at Insula Banului (Mehedinți). They had a clay floor but their shape could not be determined. At Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei II*<sup>15</sup> (Dolj) a single dwelling was discovered, belonging to the Vârtop group, whose floor (kept on 2,60x2 m) was burnt and cracked. Also in the dwellings with a floor, but from the sand, we can also include the dwelling no. 7 from Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei I* described below.

**3.2. dwellings of rectangular shape** – at Căzănești-*Săveasca*<sup>16</sup> (Vâlcea) one of the two uncovered dwellings has this shape and the dimensions of 3x2 m. At Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei I*<sup>17</sup> (Dolj), of the investigated dwellings 3 belong to the Vârtop group in Ha A (L7 Fig. 5, L8, L10). As this settlement has been systematically researched, some detailed explanations of the three dwellings could be made: all three are of rectangular shape, medium to large in size (L7-9x10 m, L8-7,5x4 m, L10-same as L7), north-south oriented, with sand floor (L7) and north-south 30 cm inclination, with an adobe border representing the crashed walls (L7).

**3.3. dwellings of unspecified form** – at Obislavu<sup>18</sup>, Portărești<sup>19</sup>, Căzănești-*Săveasca*<sup>20</sup> (Vâlcea). Here, too, we could include the above-mentioned dwelling from Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei II* although the preserved floor could indicate a rectangular shape.

<sup>13</sup> Morintz, Roman 1969, p. 398.

<sup>14</sup> Nica 1990, p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> Lazăr 2005, p. 90-91 ; Lazăr 2009, p. 28; Lazăr 2011, p. 228.

<sup>16</sup> Petre-Govora 1995, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> Lazăr 2005, p. 88-90 ; Lazăr 2009, p. 27-28; Lazăr 2011, p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> Marinescu, Munteanu 1984-1985, p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> Tătulea 1982, p. 124.

<sup>20</sup> Petre-Govora 1995, p. 54.

**3.4. surface huts** – at Balta Verde<sup>21</sup> (Mehedinți) have been identified the traces of 2 burned huts (burnt clay). At Obislavu (Vâlcea) the huts appear at 9-10 m away from the earthen rampart<sup>22</sup>.

Surface huts also appear at Vârtop where D. Berciu, in 1931, had identified and researched several mound settlements, with diameters of not more than 40 m and a height of 0,50 m, where were found traces of habitation (ceramics, adobe and other objects).

Here was excavated an oval surface hut<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 4), with diameters of 4,75 m and 3,70 m. The entrance was on the east side and the hut was surrounded by a ditch for drainage. The floor was arranged directly on the ground, trodden and glued with clay, here and there. On the edges of the hut were found pits from the pillars of the walls and in the center was placed a river stone on which the central pillar was supported. The hut had an inner hearth, in the north, made of compacted earth, glued with clay and having dimensions of 0,50x0,40 m. Inventory: household pottery, animal bones, especially around the hearth, clay weights, grinder stones, a whole cup with a support leg.

## Other accommodations (pits, fireplaces, ovens)

### 1. Fire installations

**1.1. ovens** – a horseshoe-shaped oven of 0,80x0,80 m with a dome kept on a height of 0,20 m was found in dwelling no. 8 from Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei I*.

### 1.2. fireplaces

**1.2.1. of circular shape** – at Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei I*, in dwelling L7 (1 m diameter, 0,20 m elevation from the floor and a 6 cm border), at Vârtop, in the hut excavated by D. Berciu in 1931, made from compact clay, dimensions of 0,50x0,40 m;

**1.2.2. of unspecified shape** – at Căzănești-*Săveasca*, Bârsești (Vâlcea)<sup>24</sup>, at Insula Banului<sup>25</sup> made on a bed of shards, at Balta Verde<sup>26</sup> (Mehedinți), Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei II* (Dolj).

### 2. Pits

**2.1. waste pits** – at Insula Banului<sup>27</sup> (Mehedinți), Ghidici-*Balta Țarovei I și II*<sup>28</sup> (Dolj), Brădești-*Valea Rea*<sup>29</sup> (Dolj), Gropșani<sup>30</sup> (Dolj) – pits no. 10, 46, 71, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Berciu, Comșa 1956, p. 263.

<sup>22</sup> Marinescu, Munteanu 1984-1985, p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> Berciu 1939, p. 144-145, Fig. 178.

<sup>24</sup> Petre-Govora 1995, p. 54 și urm.

<sup>25</sup> Morintz, Roman 1969, p. 396.

<sup>26</sup> Berciu, Comșa 1956, p. 263.

<sup>27</sup> Morintz, Roman 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Nica, Lazăr 1997, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> Nica 1990, p. 129.

<sup>30</sup> Popilian, Nica 1998, p. 39-40.

Pit no. 71 from this site has an oval shape, with the dimensions of 2,05 x 3 m, 1,8 m deep and contained ceramics of Vârtop type.

**2.2. ritual pits** – at Brădești-*Valea Rea*<sup>31</sup> (Dolj) there is mentioned a ritual pit, containing ash, 4 urn vessels, 2 bowls and a lid. Also a ritual pit could be pit no. 118<sup>32</sup> from Gropșani (Dolj), of oval shape, dimensions 2x1,75 m, depth 0,75 m and very rich in ceramic pots: large bowls with the edge pulled inward and with oblique grooves, amphoras with the neck in trumpet form, bitronconic cups, jars with alveolated girdle.

## Discussions

The following remarks are to be made:

We can say that only one open settlement was properly investigated and could give information on the habitat of the Vârtop group in Ha A. The same can be said about the settlement on Insula Banului of the following period, Ha B.

The fortified settlements in the area under consideration have only a refuge function and the few housing structures identified at Obislavu were probably for those who maintained the fortification or who watched on the surroundings.

The archaeological research was insufficient and unequally distributed: for the sub-Carpathian area we have information on fortified settlements but not on the open ones and the situation on the Danube and the plain area is quite opposite.

For this period, as Al. Vulpe observed<sup>33</sup>, we suppose, despite insufficient data, the existence of an organization like the kind of centers (fortifications) around which we have open small settlements and quite scattered, as in much of Europe during the UFZ (*Urnenfelderzeit*) period.

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**CAANT** – Cercetări Arheologice în Aria Nord-Tracă (București).

**Drobeta** – Drobeta. Seria Arheologie-Istorie (Drobeta-Turnu Severin).

**MCA** – Materiale și Cercetări Arheologice.

**RA, SN** – Revista Arheologică, Serie Nouă (Chișinău).

**SCIV(A)** – Studii și Cercetări de Istorie Veche (și Arheologie) (București).

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<sup>31</sup> Nica 1990, p. 129.

<sup>32</sup> Popilian, Nica 1998, p. 40.

<sup>33</sup> Davidescu, Vulpe 2010, p. 145-146.



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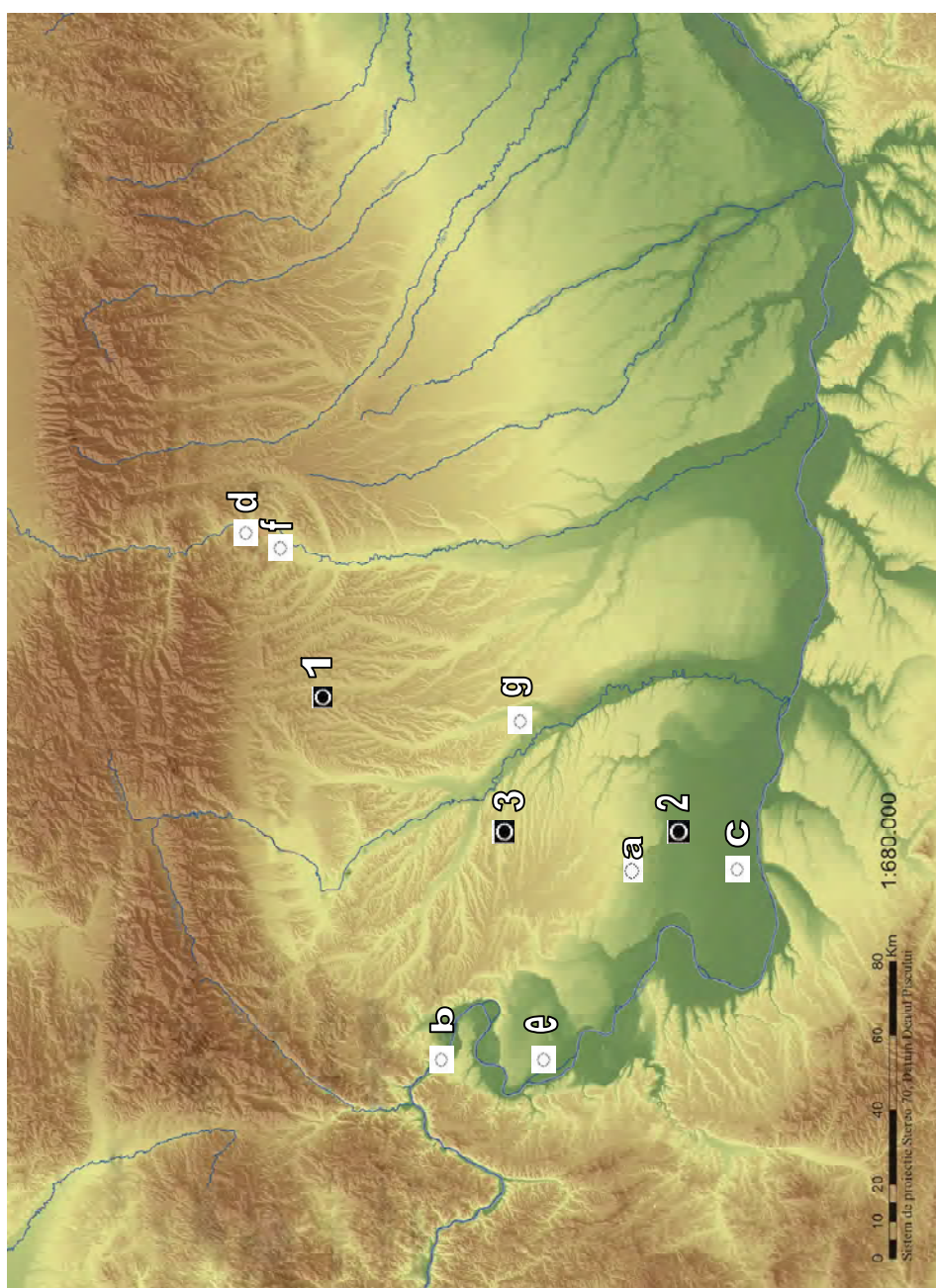
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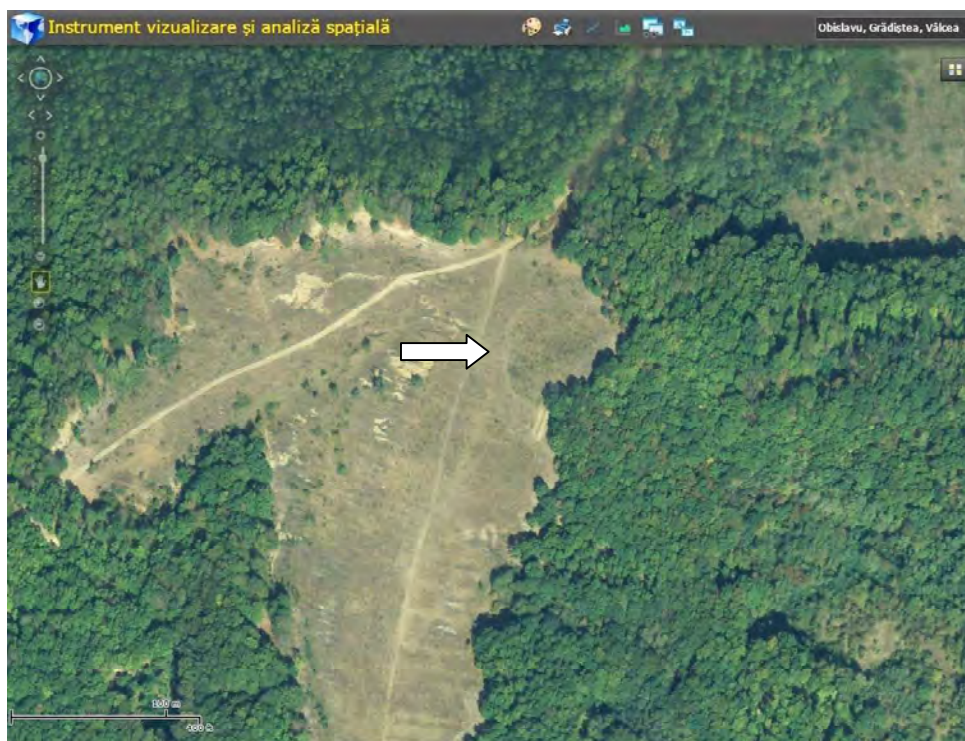
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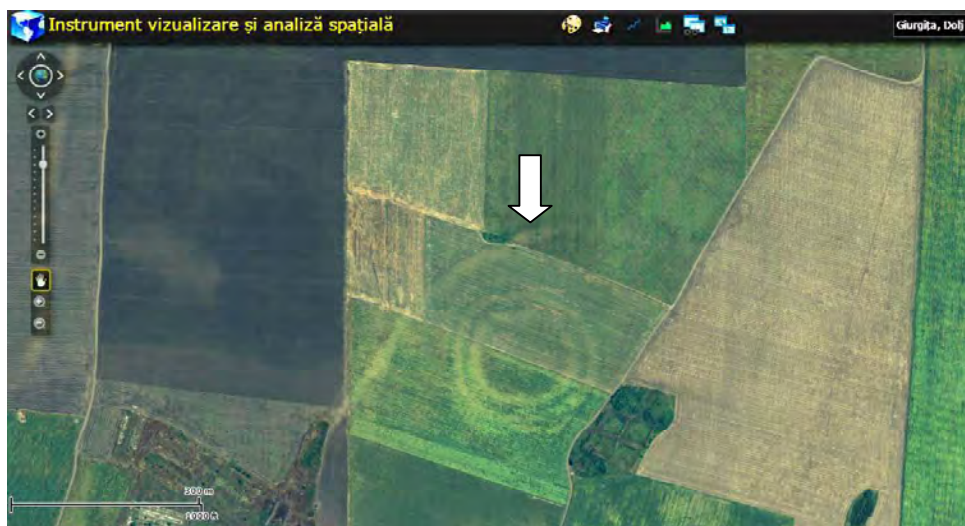
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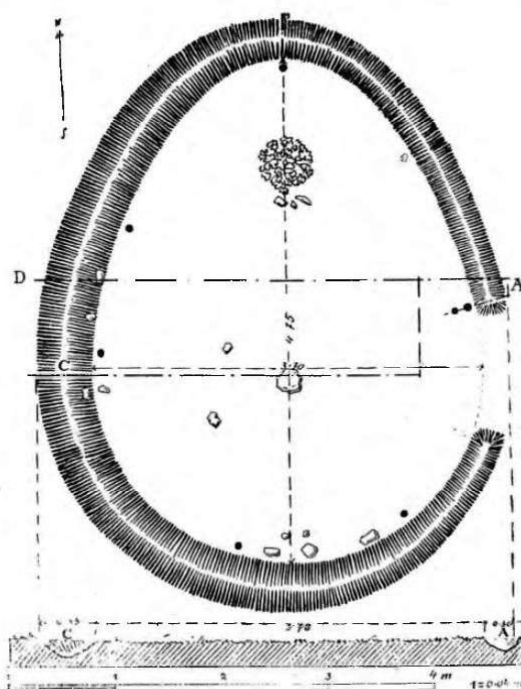
**Fig. 1** – Distribution of the settlements taken into account in this study. ■ - fortified settlements (1 Obislavu, 2 Portărești, 3 Brădești); ○ - open settlements (a Vârtop, b Insula Banului, c Ghidici, d Rm. Vâlcea-Căzănești, e Balta Verde, f Bârsești, g Gropșani)



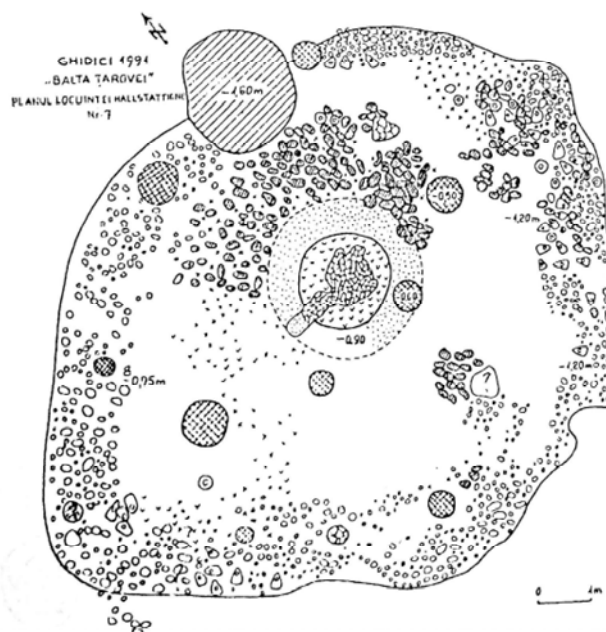
**Fig. 2** – The fortified settlement from Obislav



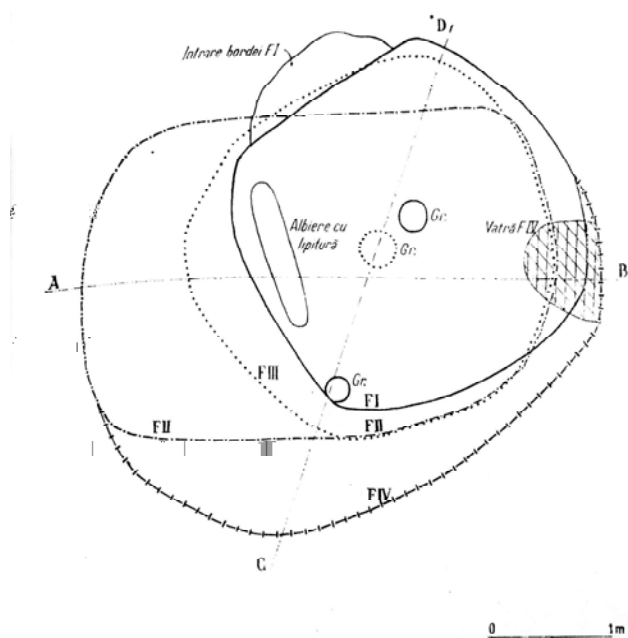
**Fig. 3** – The fortified settlement from Portărești



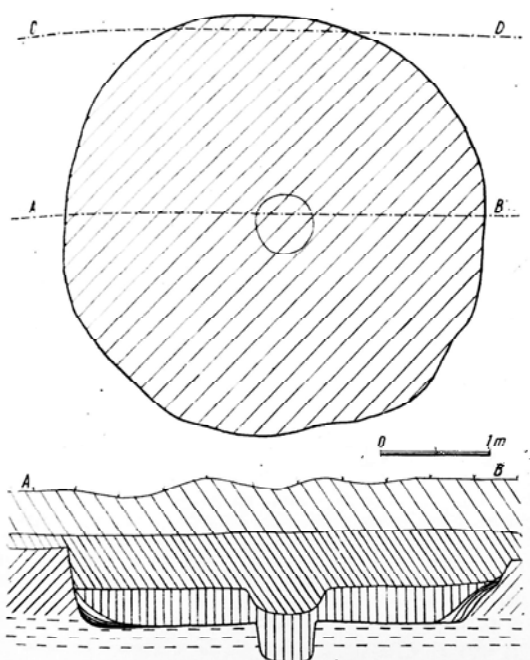
**Fig. 4** – Surface hut from Vârtop (by Berciu 1939, p. 142, Fig. 178)



**Fig. 5** – Surface dwelling nr. 7 from Ghidici (by Nica 1995, p. 241, Fig. 2/2).



**Fig. 6** – Half-buried hut from Insula Banului (by Morintz, Roman 1969, p. 395, Fig. 3).



**Fig. 7** – Half-buried hut from Insula Banului (by Morintz, Roman 1969, p. 397, Fig. 5).